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Evidence on the Indirect Contribution of Humanitarian Activities to Deradicalisation of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE); and the Risks in Linking such Objectives or Activities

Luke Kelly
University of Manchester
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Question

- *What evidence exists regarding: the contribution that humanitarian activities may indirectly contribute to deradicalisation or countering violent extremism (CVE); and the risks in linking such objectives or activities?*

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The K4D helpdesk service provides brief summaries of current research, evidence, and lessons learned. Helpdesk reports are not rigorous or systematic reviews; they are intended to provide an introduction to the most important evidence related to a research question. They draw on a rapid desk-based review of published literature and consultation with subject specialists.

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1. Summary

The retreat of Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, has led to some interest regarding what indirect contribution humanitarian activities may have on 'deradicalisation' or CVE elements.

There is no agreed definition of deradicalisation, and scholars point to a variety of facets, including psychosocial support for the traumatised, education, support in gaining employment, and links to families and community networks. Although some deradicalisation work focuses on convincing former members of extremist groups to abandon their views, most of the literature agrees that deradicalisation needs to address multiple factors including return to the community.

There is very little evidence on the indirect effects of humanitarian programmes on deradicalisation, although some suggestion that promoting humanitarian values may contribute to countering violent extremist views or provide an alternative set of values to those offered by armed groups. However, there is some evidence on intentional countering violent extremism (CVE), disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) and psychosocial support among former members of armed groups in contexts including Syria, Nigeria and the Central African Republic, which may have some modest relevance to those working within such contexts.

There is some evidence that insufficient or withholding aid can contribute to radicalisation. Long-term stays in refugee camps can lead to feelings of frustration and worthlessness, which can aid radicalisation.

Several humanitarian organisations have also warned of the risks to humanitarian principles of explicitly linking deradicalisation with humanitarian work. However, there are no evaluations of this.

The evidence-base for this overall issue is very limited. The only sources which mention the issue directly are statements of principle by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and a briefing note by the Syrian International NGO Regional Forum (SIRF). However, studies have looked at the DDR work among former child soldiers and female members of armed groups in Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Iraq, and Syria. There are few longitudinal, comparative studies, particularly of more recent situations, such as camps for former Daesh members in Iraq and Syria. Most of these studies only address deradicalisation indirectly, instead favouring the concept of 'reintegration'. There are also some studies focused on psychological help for those fleeing Daesh-held areas, although these do not use the concept of 'deradicalisation'. Only two studies focus on gender and its role in rehabilitation measures.

2. Background: definitions

Radicalisation is a poorly defined term (ICRC, 2017). Definitions differ over 'whether it constitutes a particular set of beliefs, norms, or actions, some combination thereof, or a shift in beliefs, norms, or actions'; whether the support or use of violence is a necessary part; and over how the 'process' is described. Many join a radical group before having radical beliefs, yet many analyses of radicalisation see a shift in certain beliefs as a part of a linear process towards radicalisation. The term also obscures local issues which may be driving conflict, such as resource disputes. In addition, many scholars now look to 'significance quest, peer networks and

identity' as better ways to understand individuals' motivations for taking up political violence, rather than ideas on their own (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, pp. 64–65).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) defines deradicalisation as 'the process by which the State aims to suppress or "correct" in relation to an individual or group what it considers to be extremist ideology as well as the criminalized behaviour that this ideology may have provoked, supported or facilitated' (ICRC, 2016). A Norwegian Refugee Council report notes that countering violent extremism (CVE) is similarly hard to define as 'strategies can be seen as seeking to address the more direct drivers of violent extremism, and can include methods such as disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration; and education for the purpose of "de-radicalisation". Some definitions of CVE include domestic surveillance, policing and counter-extremism messaging' (NRC, 2018). Deradicalisation programmes have been employed across the world; they often focus on a broad range of measures, including community reintegration, but their impact has not yet been fully evaluated (O' Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 95).

Deradicalisation overlaps with a number of similar concepts in use by international organisations. A UNDP report (2019) states that the UN has defined disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) as 'a process that contributes to security and stability in a post-conflict recovery context by removing weapons from the hands of combatants, taking the combatants out of military structures and helping them to integrate socially and economically into society by finding civilian livelihoods'. However, the report suggests that 'for practitioners with experience from past demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) processes, the issues are better framed as disengagement from the group; rehabilitation of the individual, family and community; and reintegration into society'. These are defined as:

- *Disengagement:* The process of leaving a violent extremist group—physically and psychologically. Deradicalisation is the cognitive part of the process rejecting the ideology of the violent extremist group.
- *Rehabilitation:* The process of positive transformation and healing from association with violent extremism.
- *Reintegration:* The process of returnees re-entering and rebuilding their lives in society.

(UNDP, 2019, p. 28).

While the focus in some of these programmes is not on the ideas held by the fighters, the goal is the same. Moreover, given that many analyses point to a quest for significance, networks and identity, rather than radical ideas per se, as drivers of radicalisation, these methods have considerable overlap with the aims of deradicalisation.

3. Positive effects of humanitarianism on deradicalisation

Values

There is some suggestion that humanitarian values can have an effect in countering extremism, or in providing an alternative set of values than those offered by armed groups. An analysis of these attitudes using interviews with victims of conflict in Northern Ireland, South Africa and Sri Lanka posits that in certain conditions 'humanitarian consideration towards erstwhile enemies resides in the social practices many victims engage in as they search

for justice, human dignity, and emotional empathy for all victims across the communal divide' (Brewer et al., 2014). However, this study focuses on victims of conflict rather than perpetrators, and does not focus on a context in which the victims are receiving aid from humanitarian organisations. It describes post-conflict societies as 'moral vacuums' where new values have to be created. Nevertheless, it suggests that there is the possibility, at least, that humanitarian actions may help those living under an extremist regime to change their outlook. Similarly, according to recent research, humanitarianism offers an alternative, benevolent path to radicalisation (Reidy, 2018). However, the evidence is limited, and there are no examples of such effects among former fighters or radicalised individuals.

The ICRC lists a number of its activities which may overlap with CVE, or may be co-opted by it and notes common goals in preventing violence. These include:

- *Promotion of international humanitarian law (IHL) or human rights standards among armed and security forces, prison authorities and judicial authorities could be seen as contributing to "[s]trengthening good governance, human rights and the rule of law," as per the UN Secretary General's (UNSG)'s plan of action.*
- *Scholastic activities, including "humanitarian education", vocational training, and activities aimed at protecting access to education in armed conflict and other situations of violence fall squarely within "Education, skills development and employment facilitation".*
- *Dialogue on IHL and diverse traditional and religious normative frameworks, including Islamic law, which is an area in which the ICRC has invested in various operational contexts in an effort to highlight the local relevance of IHL, could be confused with prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) actions aimed at promoting "dialogue and conflict prevention".*

(ICRC, 2017).

Reintegration

The literature stresses the need for reintegration efforts to prevent the members of armed groups from returning to those groups. 'Traditionally, UNDP and the World Bank have led the international community's reintegration efforts for adults, and UNICEF and its implementing partners have led child-oriented programming' (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018). Programmes have focused on creating economic opportunities, psychosocial help and ways for former fighters to integrate into communities. Much of the humanitarian literature is focused on children involved with armed groups. There is little evaluation of the impact of these programmes as of yet (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, p. 96).

The needs of children who have been members of armed groups are recognised as distinct. According to a recent report, 'in the last decade, children have been separated and protected from their commanders in cantonment and interim care centres during the DDR process. These centres are meant to be safe spaces that will allow the necessary time for screening processes, verification of identity and age, addressing health needs, and immediate psychosocial support; they aim to be places "for youth to begin their transition from the bush to 'normal' life". Family reunification is the top priority, and after family tracing children can be given "early reintegration assistance" to help them and their families adjust during the first months' (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 87).

The 2006 Integrated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration Standards for children has five components:

- Psychosocial support and care
- Family reunification and community acceptance
- Education and vocational training
- An inclusive approach
- Follow-up and monitoring

(O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, pp. 86-88).

Only some of this work is undertaken by humanitarian organisations, and many efforts are state-led. For example, 'in the European Union, reintegration programmes for children who return from NSAGs [non-state armed groups] deemed violent extremist are recommended to use tailored and holistic multi-agency case management, taking into account the rights of the child and child protection, and focusing on returning children "into an appropriate social network as soon as possible after their arrival"' (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 96).

In some cases, **deradicalisation efforts are sporadic and poorly evaluated**. Following conflict with Boko Haram, the Nigerian Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) established a facility outside the States of Emergency for the rehabilitation of non-combatant children and women associated with JAS [Jama'atul ahl al-sunnah li da'awati wal jihad, or Boko Haram], including their children born of sexual violence. The programme provided medical care, psychosocial support, counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a "de-radicalisation" programme as well as education and livelihood programmes. However, by the end of 2015, this facility was no longer in operation' (UNICEF, 2016). Indeed, a War Child report recommends more longitudinal studies into effectiveness of different mechanisms of DDR (War Child, 2017, p. 5)

Deradicalisation can be useful in creating more positive perceptions of former fighters. An evaluation of reintegration measures targeting children notes: 'Even when their impact on beneficiaries was questionable, local deradicalization interventions may serve as a signalling metric for communities that the individuals returning home no longer pose a security risk, thus easing reintegration. In light of the terminology used by interviewees in Nigeria who highlighted the need for such vetting, however, it is not clear that such signalling is contingent on programmes being labelled as deradicalization (as compared to rehabilitation or another more neutral term)' (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 52).

Psychosocial support

Psychosocial support is used as part of deradicalisation and reintegration processes, particularly for children or coerced members of armed groups. A report by War Child emphasises the importance of mental health and psychosocial health interventions for children involved in armed conflicts. Although focused more on the reintegration of children and helping their mental health, the report has potential implications for deradicalisation programmes in that the children have either been exposed to or perpetrated violence, even if they have not been radicalised ideologically. It notes that 'the extreme violence they have been exposed to, as both perpetrators and victims, impacts their mental health, and their psychological, social and emotional wellbeing' (War Child, 2017, p. 4). Using examples from the Central African Republic,

the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, the report emphasises the importance of existing support networks and reintegration measures as well as specific psychological interventions (War Child, 2017, p. 5).

A report by the Syria International NGO Regional Forum (SIRF, 2019, p. 6) says that the following features have led to a 'reduction in aggression' among children and mothers in Al Hole camp: 'psychosocial support (particularly with appropriate staffing and individual case management for severely distressed individuals and victims of abuse); child friendly spaces; life skills, parenting support, and livelihoods training; and community-based, social cohesion programming can help to address trauma and the underlying tensions in the camp, as well as provide positive social interactions for individuals, particularly women, children, and youth'.

However, **the link between psychosocial support and deradicalisation is indirect, if it exists at all.** For instance, a report on female social workers involved in conflict discusses work in prisons with former Daesh fighters describes the social workers talking to former fighters in Lebanon: 'any talk of religious affiliation or ideology was too sensitive. Instead, [female social workers] drew on techniques of social work to tap into humanitarian aspects, including the prisoners' needs and emotions. Gender dynamics were also critical to their ability to reach and engage the prisoners. As men, the prisoners were more willing to speak openly to women about their childhood traumas or other experiences and fears' (UNDP, 2019, p. 47). While the work was part of efforts to reintegrate violent extremists, it was seen to succeed because the social workers distanced themselves from the authorities and avoided explicit discussion of ideology. Evaluations of psychological interventions do not focus on deradicalisation, even if they may be seen to address some of the causes of radicalisation indirectly (IASC, 2017).

4. Limits of deradicalisation

Difficulties of deradicalisation

There is anecdotal evidence that deradicalisation is difficult to achieve in camps. Support for Daesh ideology persists among women held after the retreat of Daesh One woman interviewed by the *New York Times* 'described life in the caliphate as "all very good." "There were brothers who believed in Shariah, an Islamic state, and it was not like this," she said, pointing disapprovingly at two female aid workers wearing pants' (Hubbard, 2019). This is not necessarily best understood as simply a question of ideology, but rather identity. A UN report notes: 'Another social barrier to the reintegration of children is that collective identities formed during engagement with NSAGs tend to persist in programming settings. A UNICEF officer in Lebanon reported that children formerly engaged with rival NSAGs do not mix well and sometimes fight' (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 135).

Many sources emphasise that to be effective, deradicalisation should provide an alternative sense of purpose for fighters. 'Additionally, in the case of children who initially joined NSAGs in pursuit of a meaningful and dignified life, some of those who disengage struggle with feelings of worthlessness and disempowerment, particularly if they are unable to find social and vocational fulfilment among civilians. Tarek, who joined [Jabhat al-Nusra] at the age of 14 and was interviewed in southern Turkey while temporarily disengaged in order to receive medical treatment for a leg injury, reported feeling "lost", as if his life had "no purpose", saying, "I am nothing without a weapon"' (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 134).

The available evidence suggests that deradicalisation works best when considered alongside a broader reintegration programme. A discussion of the Al Hole camp in Iraq asserts that the reintegration of people formerly living under Daesh cannot be addressed in the camp, and that consideration of the host society to which they are returning is also needed (SIRF, 2019). A report on the reintegration of child fighters states 'emerging evidence suggests such efforts are more effective when tailored to local needs and integrated with the provision of other aid components' (War Child, 2017, p. 3).

A number of social barriers to reintegration need to be considered, including:

- Stigma for returning fighters in their communities (War Child, 2017, p. 18);
- The 'attribution of collective guilt to the family or tribe of the perpetrator in Iraq and Syria';
- The lack of economic opportunities, which may have spurred radicalisation in the first place (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 135);
- Ongoing conflicts make it hard for former fighters to imagine a non-violent future;
- The threat of armed groups accessing camps for retribution or re-recruitment (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 136).

The roles of women in armed groups are poorly understood. Large numbers of women have joined or been part of armed groups, yet 'the data and literature on women returning from violent extremist groups remains limited' (UNDP, 2019, p. 35). According to a recent UNDP report, 'of the 41,490 foreigners who became affiliated with IS in Iraq and Syria, up to 4,761, or 13%, are women.' About 2,000 being held by Kurdish authorities. Women have also been members of captives of armed groups in Nigeria, Kenya, Indonesia, Lebanon, Tunisia and other contexts (UNDP, 2019, p. 9).

The report argues that gender dynamics are crucial to deradicalisation and reintegration. The roles the women had, whether they were willing participants or coerced, whether they were subject to sexual violence, and how they will be received when they return to their communities, all affect how they can be reintegrated. Women have had multiple roles in armed groups including 'recruiters, educators, campaigners, financiers, brides, logistic arrangers, supporters, or a combination of these', as well as being the mothers of children born within the territories held by armed groups. These roles are often misperceived, and women and others are often simply categorised as either perpetrators of violence or coerced, which affects how they are treated (UNDP, 2019, p. 7).

Measures should be taken to consider the particular circumstances of women who have been in armed groups in some capacity: 'In many instances, women feared and were subjected to sexual assault in the camps. For this reason, it is best practice in DDR to segregate women and men, particularly in terms of shelter and accessibility of sanitation facilities. But this also causes challenges for those who come in as families, or women who have teenage boys' (UNDP, 2019, p. 45).

Humanitarian concerns of deradicalisation in detention

An ICRC report (2016) sets out the risks of using deradicalisation measures in a detention context. It emphasises that detention authorities should still follow observe some fundamental when dealing with detained former fighters:

- Humane treatment of detainees and respect for the rule of law.

- Informed individual risk and needs assessment.
- Restrictions that are legally based, necessary and proportionate.
- High quality, trained and supervised detention staff.
- Legality of detention, preparation for release and aftercare.
- Good order and security in detention for all detainees.

It lists the following potential problems that may arise when detention authorities undertake deradicalisation among detained populations, such as demobilised fighters:

- Arbitrary categorisation of groups deemed to be 'at risk' of radicalisation.
- Excessive restrictions and constraints, including essential services, education services and liberty.
- Misplaced focus on ideology and on modifying beliefs which can carry over into restricting freedom of belief (e.g. Islam).
- Under-investment in detention and probation-type services' capacity, expertise, and legitimacy.
- Insufficiently trained and supervised staff in an insufficiently professional prison service.
- Discriminatory practices within detention systems, and neglect of prisoners who are not radicalised.

(ICRC, 2016)

Compromising humanitarian principles

The Norwegian Refugee Council warns against humanitarians undertaking CVE work (NRC, 2018, pp. 18–19). It notes that '[p]rogrammes developed on the assumption that certain communities are more likely to support violent extremism based on their religion, geographical location or other factors clearly contradict the principle of impartiality', particularly in areas deemed hostile to the government such as Sunni communities in Iraq. Similarly, '[i]nterviewees in Somalia said development and dual-mandate organisations had been taking P/CVE funding, and that this presented a challenge for humanitarians because non-state armed groups and communities did not necessarily understand the distinction between the two' (NRC, 2018, p. 22). The report notes many plausible concerns with linking CVE to humanitarian approach, although there is little concrete evidence of it having occurred as yet.

Similarly, the ICRC's stance is that humanitarian action must be separate from CVE measures to maintain impartiality and neutrality. It states:

- *The ICRC recognises that its humanitarian action may partially overlap with P/CVE to the extent that it contributes to preventing and alleviating the effects of violence. Indeed, compliance with IHL and the rule of law in general is essential in preventing downward spirals of retaliatory violence and extreme behaviour on all sides of any given confrontation.*
- *This indirect contribution depends on the ICRC's ability to remain impartial, neutral and independent and, therefore, not to be directly associated with P/CVE efforts (ICRC, 2017).*

Negative effects of insufficient or withholding of aid/services

A report by the think tank RAND Corporation, based on analysis of a number of refugee situations over the past six decades, argues that although the provision of humanitarian aid will not prevent radicalisation, **insufficient levels of aid can help push refugees towards radicalisation**. It notes the importance of longer-term solutions that enable refugees to integrate into society: 'The longer refugees are confined to camps and the lower the likelihood that the initiating crisis will be resolved quickly, the greater the risk of radicalization and waning host country commitment appears to become' (Sude et al., 2015).

If states or humanitarians deny former members of radical groups the means to contact their families or make a new life, this could lead to frustration and hinder de-radicalisation efforts. As an example, reports note that former Daesh IDPs in Iraq are not being allowed to get ID cards, violating humanitarian law and making it very hard for them to access services and participate in society. Withholding ID cards 'might even lead to renewed forms of marginalisation of individuals and sections of the population with inevitable consequences, such as further radicalisation and violent extremism in the long term' (van der Wolff, 2019). A report by charities working in Syria states: 'It is extremely challenging to work on (re)integration in a camp setting as residents will not permanently reside in Al Hole. Individuals will not respond well to any de-radicalization efforts when their liberties have been taken from them and when their future is uncertain' (SIRF, 2019).

Indeed, the **camps themselves can have the effect of maintaining radicalisation**. A report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation notes: 'The trauma experienced by minors (and adults) has not stopped with the physical liberation from IS. For some, placement in detention centres or segregated IDP camps not only prolongs physical isolation and deprivation, but also solidifies their new identity as "IS families"' (Cook & Vale, 2018). Studies also note that being in camps known for deradicalisation or CVE efforts can lead to former members of armed groups being stigmatised when they return to their communities (O'Neill & Van Broeckhoven, 2018, p. 253).

Prolonged stays in refugee camps or IDP camps can lead to radicalisation when combined with other risk factors. These factors include attitudes and conditions in the host country, the actions of armed groups, as well as conditions in the camps themselves. The following figures outline some cases from the last six decades.

See: Figure 1: Historical cases of radicalisation among refugees, Sude, B., Stebbins, D., & Weiland, S. (2015:3).

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE166/RAND_PE166.pdf

See: Figure 2: Critical factors in historical cases, Sude, B., Stebbins, D., & Weiland, S. (2015:6-7).
https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE166/RAND_PE166.pdf

The authors emphasise that material deprivation alone does not cause radicalisation; instead combinations of factors including host country policies, the role of radical groups, and economic opportunities for youth, should be looked at.

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